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Higher Ed Commissioner Stresses Importance of Student Financial Aid

Commissioner of Higher Education Joseph Savoie told the Board of Regents that while Louisiana has made great strides in increasing the overall educational level of its citizens in recent years, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have driven down college enrollment significantly. Moreover, the state's pipeline of high school graduates, which was already on the decline due to overall population attrition, has been further decimated by the 2005 storms. Savoie made the observations at the Regents' meeting this week as part of a presentation detailing Louisiana's outlook for producing more college graduates to spur the state's economy.

"Our supply of high school graduates has been steadily declining since about 2000," Savoie said. "That decline was accelerated by the storms, and it looks like it will be several years before graduation numbers recover. We have to take measures to make college more accessible – and more affordable – to *more* of the high school graduates that we *do* produce."

Savoie said the state is working on a variety of fronts to accomplish this goal:

- Aligning high school curriculum with college/workforce preparation
- Focusing on dropout recovery/prevention at both the high school and college levels
- Expanding dual enrollment opportunities for high school students to take college-credit courses
- Expanding access to community colleges and technical colleges
- Expanding adult learning/literacy
- Developing a financial aid program for needy students

Governor Blanco's High School Redesign Commission has proposed strategies to address high school curriculum alignment, dropout prevention and dual enrollment. Savoie said research indicates that the most efficient way for a state to expand access to postsecondary education is to increase its investment in student financial aid. He said that while the details of the Board of Regents' financial aid proposal have not yet been worked out, it will seek to provide educational opportunity for those who are most economically disadvantaged and will encourage a shared

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Financial Aid

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responsibility for the costs of college among the student, his/her family, the college or university and the state.

As a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Louisiana has lost 35,000 college students. In addition, estimates are that there will be 3,000 fewer high school graduates next year, and more than 58,000 elementary and secondary school students displaced by the storms have not re-enrolled at any public school in Louisiana.

“If Louisiana is to have a competitive economy in the near- and long-term future, we must get larger numbers of our remaining students into and successfully completing college,” Savoie said.

In related business, the Board of Regents received a report on the accomplishments and status of the state’s LA GEAR UP (Louisiana Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) initiative. In 2002, Louisiana received a five-year, \$12.5 million federal grant to create the multifaceted program, which is aimed at improving the college going and success rates of students in targeted underperforming school districts across the state. The grant was extended last year through 2008. Among the highlights enumerated in the report were the following:

- The number of students benefitting from LA GEAR UP has increased from 2,500 in 2002-03 to 11,000 in 2006-07.
- Under LA GEAR UP’s “Professional Development for Teachers” initiative, there have been more than 150 projects to improve teaching effectiveness in mathematics, science and language arts.
- Under the “Rewards for Success” program, designed as a supplement award to partner with Louisiana’s TOPS program and the federal Pell Grant, over 3,000 awards (in amounts of \$250 to \$1000), totaling more than \$1.5 million, have been presented to LA GEAR UP students in the form of Louisiana START college savings accounts.
- Student attendance at summer learning camps has increased from 473 in 2002 to an estimated 1,240 for the 2007 camps to be held across the state.